

TESTIMONY: SB337

EXHIBIT 4
DATE 3/19/09
SB 337

**SUBMITTED BY: TRACY KING, COUNCILMAN, FORT BELKNAP INDIAN
COMMUNITY COUNCIL**

MARCH 19, 2009

I am appearing on behalf of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine people of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. I appreciate the opportunity to appear and provide a few comments on this bill which would make it nearly impossible for Yellowstone Buffalo to be relocated anywhere in Montana except to the Flathead Valley. Simply stated, we simply do not agree with the reasons offered.

Montanans hold firmly to a reputation of being independent, talented caretakers of the land, domestic livestock and wildlife. Except for the near extinction of some species, care has been taken to preserve the natural wonders of this land for future generations. Recent efforts to bring back species from near extinction, like the wolf and buffalo demonstrate a recognition for the benefits of a balanced eco-system, with varied levels of wildlife.

Most people at least acknowledge historical Tribal reliance on the buffalo in our culture. It shouldn't surprise anyone that in dealing with the many problems on reservations today, a desire to return to healthier eating and lifestyles includes the buffalo. At Fort Belknap, the reintroduction of the buffalo began nearly 40 years ago with a small herd that has been maintained, uninterrupted, ever since.

We have been operating a small meat packing plant and sausage kitchen which will continue to rely heavily on available buffalo for sales locally and regionally. Buffalo meat has proven health benefits that our community desires to reinstitute in our diets. With growing rates of diabetes, our doctors have encouraged diets with buffalo meat as a primary focus.

The presence of our herd has not been a source of controversy in its near 40 year history. Brucellosis has not been an issue, because we have made consistent efforts to manage our herd with rules and regulations that have worked. We have culled animals which have escaped fencing. We have sold animals in years where our available range grass and/or feed has been insufficient to meet needs of the buffalo.

Needless to say, we are very jealous of our decades of operating a brucellosis free buffalo herd. WE WILL DO NOTHING TO JEOPARDIZE this status. Our buffalo pasture only borders off-reservation operators on one side. The other three sides of the pasture border range units and lands which are utilized by cattle! We have been in the buffalo and cattle business for decades. We will do nothing to jeopardize either. We are fully aware of the dangers of brucellosis. Our track record of nearly 40 years BRUCELLOSIS FREE demonstrates this beyond any doubt. Our record is far better than that of Yellowstone Park, and is equal to or better than the Buffalo Range in the Flathead Valley.

Senator Hansen, in February, stood before this body and related "fears" that our buffalo have no grass, routinely wander off reservation and that the Tribe doesn't respond when called about wandering buffalo. His examples constitute isolated incidents. He neglected to describe the weather conditions on the occasion where the rancher shot 6 of our buffalo. The snow was so high after a heavy storm, the buffalo walked over the top of fences to escape. Rather than call us about the buffalo, that rancher chose to shoot the animals. Most of us would agree that if that is how your neighbor acts, they aren't a neighbor at all. This kind of provocative action caused range wars in the past.

You obviously haven't heard of any "range wars" in north central Montana. We have not responded in kind. We have worked to get along and respond to needs. (and continue brucellosis free!!) We routinely call owners of cattle who

get out onto Tribal lands. This is just neighborly practice. We don't expect a neighbor to have to hire hands to drive our buffalo anywhere. We have several full-time employees responsible for the feeding and maintenance of our herd.

However, you can imagine our concern, when this unreasonable slaughter of animals by a "neighbor" is cited by our Senate representative to somehow justify ignoring our decades of operating a brucellosis free buffalo operation. Tribal buffalo operations have operated brucellosis free. Montana lost its brucellosis free designation because of herds likely infected by elk.

We don't take brucellosis lightly. We have instituted regulations and policies that have worked. We would be happy to share these policies. If allowed to take further Yellowstone buffalo that have been tested free from brucellosis, we will maintain a brucellosis free herd with these policies. We will respect our neighbors, both on and off reservation, regardless of their refusal to do likewise.

We simply ask that facts and history control this decision. It is simply unfair to ignore that the Tribal buffalo herds in this state have successfully managed brucellosis free herds. They should not be eliminated by SB337 as a possible location to place animals from Yellowstone Park or elsewhere. Please vote against this bill as offered, as it unfairly seeks to eliminate options for Yellowstone Park and Tribes.

Thank You.